THE ILIAD
LESSON PLANS

THE PARTHENON

Dear Teacher:

In partnership with the Tennessee Performing Arts Center's HOT production of* The Iliad *(January 12-15, 2009) by the Aquila Theatre Company, the Parthenon offers the following high school lesson plan.

We invite high school students to explore the complexity of this epic tale from the perspective of cultural memory and universal themes. In doing so, we look at the role of art – the visual arts as well as language arts – in challenging and sustaining memory, impacting our vision of events, and transmitting the raw emotion and reality of the moment into the cultural memory.

It is our hope that along with the HOT theatre production, these lesson plans provide high school students new insights and a new appreciation of Homer's epic.

DeeGee Lester, Education Director
The Parthenon

extending beyond the ordinary in size or scope.

Attributed to Homer and rooted in a rich oral tradition over 3,000 years old, the Iliad, along with The Odyssey, amazingly continues to speak to audiences. The walls of Troy, the love between Paris and the beautiful Helen, the rage of Achilles, the bravery of Hector, the agony of Priam, and the mutual annihilation of men live on as vividly today as in the memory of the ancient Greeks through the words and rhythms of these ancient texts. While the memories of other men and other battles have been lost to history, these continue to fire the imaginations and emotions of 21st century readers and audiences. Is the pen, indeed, mightier than the sword? When the battles are over, is what is written about them, painted about them, and cast in monuments to them, the true and final memory?

The arts – the words and images of historical events – constitute the cultural memory. Humanity embraces Homer's words as the memory of Troy; the photographic image of Big Foot, the leader of the Sioux, lying frozen in the snow is singular "memory" of the massacre at Wounded Knee; the American Revolution is captured and remembered in the visual image of *Washington Crosses the Delaware*, a dramatic painting by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, created more than half-a-century after the event; and Picasso's Cubist painting of massacre in a little-known Spanish village (*Guernica)* holds a place of honor within the walls of the United Nations to remind visitors of the horrors of war in the lives of civilians. A great work of art – play, poem, painting, photograph, sculpture, film, piece of music or a dance – has the power to capture and reinforce collective public memory or to *transform* collective memory of a person or event.

A great work of art also holds the power to take a specific event and expand it to represent the universal experience of all men. That is the true power of the *Iliad.* It is why Stanley Lombardo's translation of the epic and Peter Meineck's direction so successfully transform an ancient story to fit the world war of the twentieth century.

Exploring Universal Aspects of War in the Iliad:

Students talk of the horrors of war or the futility of war. With the immediacy of modern communications, the selected images of war enter our homes and beam in streaming video across the Internet; we can play war with unbelievable realism on our Play-Stations™. Today's students look at war from the only perspective they have – a 21st century perspective. They often forget that 200-300 years ago soldiers were not an "Army of One," fighting alongside men they had only recently met. Our ancestors fought in militias rounded up locally and comprised of their neighbors, friends and relatives. The wealthiest man in the county organized and often funded the unit, a neighbor was "the Colonel", the guy alongside in battle was a kid brother. To refuse to fight for your home, your town, your county, was considered an act of cowardice. Kids grew up on heroic tales; their heroes were not athletes or celebrities, but warriors. Men proved themselves on the field of battle, and officers sent to some "god-forsaken outpost" to drill day after day and never taste "the glories of battle" feared for their careers and their sanity. Up until the horrors of trench warfare in World War One (The Great War), men whose mission lacked action in battle lobbied superiors, pulled strings, commandeered transportation, and volunteered in any capacity to get to the *real* battlefields. Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders literally raced ahead of other troops to board a ship for Cuba *before all of the fighting was over*. While *stuck* in India, Winston Churchill begged and pleaded with his mother to use all of her influence with the King of England to transfer her ambitious son to Kitchener's forces in North Africa. And until World War II thrust him into fame, General Dwight D. Eisenhower sulked and grieved for years as he was shuttled from post to post on his reputation as an instructor and a great football coach.

In the cause of revenge, in the cause of honor, in the cause of freedom, in the cause of glory, in the cause of a myriad of words and mottos and images, men were willing time and again to line up and march across open fields in full view of enemy guns for "the cause." Single battle casualty statistics were monstrous with numbers such as 23,000 (Battle of Shiloh); 181,000 (Battle of the Bulge); and 700,000 (Verdun); dead and wounded not uncommon. In the 21st century our question to these ghosts of the past is "Why?" Understanding the why of this and other questions is the challenge and the goal of the historian. This lesson is not a critique or debate about current wars, but an artistic, literary, and historical look at war throughout history and how the prelude to war, the wars themselves, and the post-war periods were reflected through the emotion and beauty of the arts.

Activity 1:

Find evidence within the text of the *Iliad* of the following universal themes in relation to war:

- Justification of war
- War as a path to personal and national glory.
- The obligations and love of country versus the obligations and love of family.

- Mutual annihilation and mutual loss.
- The importance of burial and commemoration.
- How the end of one war sows the seed of the next.

Activity 2:

Find the definitions and characteristics of the following art forms that emerged during the first half of the 20th century:

- Futurism
- Expressionism
- Dadaism
- Cubism

Next, ask students to explore the Art of the First World War, a website featuring the drawings and paintings by artists such as Picasso, John Singer Sargent, Dino Severin, Max Beckman, Alfred Kubin, John Nash, and CRW Nevinson at www.art.ww1.com. Select examples from the 105 works listed on the web site, identify the style of art and explain how the elements of style (color, line, perspective, etc.) become vehicles to successfully describe the war. Was the particular piece created during the war or in the post-war period, or long after the event? Do students believe the piece can be considered as "capturing the historic moment" or as propaganda for a point of view? Was the artist a participant in the war from a military standpoint or did the artist observe the events or record them at some distance from the war? Do distance and time prejudice or impact the depiction of the event? Do students have examples of audiences accepting a later depiction as the reality of the event (for example, *Washington Crosses the Delaware).*

Activity 3:

Background:

Finally, explore the eternal themes of the *Iliad* through the writings of French philosopher, Simone Weil. Written in 1939, on the eve of the Nazi occupation of France, Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* attained cult status, particularly among pacifists, following her death (1943) and the publication of the piece (1945). Although rarely published during her brief lifetime (1909-1943), the posthumous publication of her works filled 16 volumes.

Born into wealth and highly educated, Weil alternately taught philosophy and worked in vineyards and factories. She volunteered briefly in the Spanish Civil War

and flirted with, and ultimately became disillusioned with, religion and various political ideologies. But her active participation in and analysis of the human experience and her habit of looking at the events of her lifetime through the broad lens of time and eternal truths, gave her writings a power that speaks to readers today.

Based upon the previous exercises and the Aquila production at TPAC, look at the following Weil quotes from *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* as points for class discussion:

- Opening lines from Weil:
  "In this work (the *Iliad*), at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle…To define force – it is that x factor that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing…*"

- ."…those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed."

In the discussion ask students to give examples from the *Iliad* as well as from Weil's 1939 prophetic warnings for WWII.

Additional topics that may be discussed include:

- **Weil insists the real hero of the *Iliad* is <u>force</u> and that force generates and regenerates its own existence. Can students support or challenge her theories?**
- **How do the characteristics of art movements during the first half of the 20th century reinforce Weil's philosophical world view as reflected in *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force?***